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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some of the past literature on male-female wage differentials in order to determine the early hypotheses which are the historical roots of the current theoretical and empirical work analyzing male-female wage differentials. Part 1 reviews the discrimination hypotheses, which emphasize differences in the labor market conditions (such as crowding, job segmentation, and lack of organization) that result in different rates of pay for the same work. Part 2 reviews the human capital hypotheses, which assume that the sexes have different productive attributes that yield wage differentials. This discussion focuses on socialization, labor force commitment, investment in human capital, differential female supply prices, and physical strength differences. Part 3 provides a summary and conclusion suggesting that policy directed toward reducing male-female wage differentials should be broad in scope and address itself to the numerous causes of the differentials indicated in parts 1 and 2. (BM)

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MALE-FEMALE WAGE DIFFERENTIALS:

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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MALE-FEMALE WAGE DIFFERENTIALS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The importance of women in the labor force has increased significantly over the last few decades. As has been documented by Hilda Kahne, "a new self-awareness among women, about their right to, as well as their interest in, work and to being considered independent economic agents controlling their destinies in the same way as men," has led to an increasing amount of research effort to identify and explain male-female wage differentials (see Kahne, 1975, pp. 1249-1292). In her survey, Kahne categorizes recent theoretical work into two broad groups: discrimination theories and hypotheses based on human capital theory. Examples of the former include works by Arrow, which is based on a neoclassical model by which wage discrimination results primarily from differences in racial tastes; by Phelps, whose statistical theory of discrimination is also based on a neoclassical model utilizing sex and race as proxies for various relevant job market characteristics; and a variety of works based on market imperfections, such as Bergmann's "crowding hypothesis," Madden's male monopoly power model, as well as several "radical" models. For the most part, theoretical arguments based on human capital theory have focused on the socialization process of women and its impact on decision-making. Examples include the works by Mincer and Polachek and by Polachek on sex differences with respect to decisions regarding labor force participation; the work by Sandell on differential rates between sexes for investment in human capital and the interaction between investment decisions and labor force participation; and the work by Gronau emphasizing a human capital approach to job search behavior.

These and other theoretical papers as well as the numerous related empirical studies reflect a strong interest by economists in male-female wage differentials. However, concern about the status of women at work is by no means new. The objective of this paper is to review some of the past literature in order to determine the early hypotheses which are the historical roots of the current theoretical and empirical work analyzing male-female wage differentials. The literature review will show that, although little new theoretical ground has actually been broken, recent works represent important extensions and refinements of earlier hypotheses.

For purposes of simplicity and clarity, the dichotomy employed by Kahne, namely, "discrimination hypotheses" and "human capital hypotheses," will be used here. Basically, early discrimination hypotheses attempted to explain why male and female workers with equal productivity-enhancing traits received "unequal pay for equal work." Although not independent, some of the direct causes suggested for unequal pay for the same work included: 1) crowding by females into certain occupations, 2) segmentation of jobs into male and female groups, and 3) lack of union and political organizations by women. These causes are examined in greater detail in Part I. Human capital hypotheses, discussed in Part II, attributed male-female wage differentials to sex differences in initial endowments or to the process of socialization of females for inferiority in the labor market. The socialization process tends to manifest itself in 1) low labor force commitment, 2) unwillingness to acquire productive skills, and 3) differential supply prices for women. Accordingly, lower pay for females does not necessarily imply labor market sex discrimination, but may result from 1) inadequate physical strength, 2) different types of schooling for females, 3) conditioning of females by society toward non-market activities, and 4) social custom.

It should be noted that the discussions presented in Parts I and II are intended to be representative of the views of early Western writers on male-female wage

differentials. To avoid unnecessary redundancy, an exhaustive survey was not included. Part III contains a brief summary and conclusion.

I. DISCRIMINATION HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses reviewed in this section provide a common approach to the explanation of male-female wage differentials in that female inferiority in production is not assumed. Rather, the hypotheses emphasize differences in the labor market conditions facing males and females, such as crowding, job segmentation, and lack of organization, which result in different rates of pay for the same work. These hypotheses provide a historical benchmark for the recent, more formal theories of wage differences between the sexes.

Crowding

Interestingly, one of the earliest writers to focus on crowding as a cause for male-female wage differences implied that the crowding was the result of voluntary choices by women. Denslow, in a debate with Blake in 1882, argued that higher wages for males than for females could result from nonpecuniary benefits received by women in certain occupations, and hence did not necessarily indicate sex discrimination. According to Denslow, ". . . this very abatement of pay for a specific quantity of work must be due . . . to the fact that . . . working women themselves, for their own reasons, discriminate against so many occupations as to leave their wage smaller in those to which they resort." Blake responded that although women were trying to enter numerous nontraditional occupations, they were met by bitter male opposition. Blake failed, however, to specify the means by which men were able to oppose entry. (Denslow and Blake, Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, 1886, p. 76).

John Stuart Mill believed that the problem of wage differentials between men and women lay in the specific types of employment open to women. In occupations

where wages are determined by competition, Mill held that the relatively low wages of women reflected an excess supply of female labor. Although the proportion of women in the labor force was less than the proportion of males, the occupations actually available to women were so few that these occupations were overcrowded (Mill, 1898, p. 409).

The fact that some occupations were closed to women and some employers were willing to pay men higher wages than equally-qualified women is inconsistent with the Classical economists' generally expressed conception of a competitive market. Mill, however, viewed the "women problem" within a theory of noncompeting groups, much like current radical economists have analyzed the "race problem."

Similarly, Millicent Fawcett in 1892 (Fawcett, 1892, pp. 173-176) and F. W. Taussig in 1916 (Taussig, 1916, pp. 44) argued that male-female wage differences resulted generally from the existence of noncompeting groups in the labor market. Women historically had tended to crowd into predominantly female industries in which their contribution to the firm was less than an employee's contribution in predominantly male industries. Although effective competition existed within the respective industries there was no competition between the industries. At the present, Fawcett argued, women did not have, and could not acquire, the skills necessary to enter the high wage male industries.

Segmentation of Jobs

Crowding of women into particular jobs helped lead to distinct male and female occupations. If the occupation was desirable, men would fight vigorously to keep it to themselves. This promoted crowding and put downward pressure on wages in the "female" occupations. According to Beatrice Webb:

> The outcome, down to the war, was a very general segregation of men and women in industry, the two sexes being very seldom employed on the same kinds of work, or in the production of exactly the same articles. Whether

the segregation of the sexes in industry was influenced by custom and convention, or determined by relative aptitude, its result upon wages was to give rise to markedly different rates of remuneration for what was recognized as a "man's job" and a "woman's job" (Mrs. S. Webb, 1919, p. 19).

Similarly, in 1919 Snedden made the following observation about job segmentation:

> It is probably much nearer the facts to describe modern specialized callings in factory, store, and large office as consisting of levels largely, if not wholly, unconnected with each other. The work on certain levels is peculiarly suited to the powers of young people, and often to persons of quite mediocre native abilities. On other levels, maturity and perhaps native ability are required, but not necessarily experience on lower levels in the same establishment. . . It is clearly to the interest of the worker as well as of society that transition from lower to higher levels should be rendered as easy and timely as practicable for each worker when maturity and ability justify it. That is far from being the case at present. Where production is highly organized, all the work of one "level" being confined to one great room or even shop, the best workers of this level are retained as long as possible, and every barrier is interposed to their movement upward -- a situation in direct contrast to the "ladder" system of advancement. Most of the wage-earnings work upon which girls and women enter is of a highly subdivided and specialized character, and this promises to be increasingly the case (Snedden, 1919, pp. 562-63).

It is interesting that Snedden's view of the labor market is similar to proponents of dual labor markets and the works of most radical labor economists.

Lack of Organization

C. D. Wright perceived in 1888 that the principal reason for low wages earned by females was their lack of economic and political influence. According to Wright:

> Women has lacked, so far, the influence which comes from combination and association. She works in an individual capacity and with the weakness of individual effort. She has not learned the power of combining her forces, nor the powerful influence which comes from combinations, as men have done. Furthermore, she has not been a political factor in society . . . . The lack of direct political influence must be considered as constituting a powerful reason why woman's wages have been kept at the minimum (Wright, 1889, p. 629).

Sidney Webb concurred that lack of union organization was partly responsible for inferior wages by women and added that the refusal by men to admit women in trade unions was based "on the ground that the women cannot obtain the union scale of piece-work rates which is strictly maintained" (Webb, 1891, p. 647). Webb suggested that this reason is invalid and that the "line of division between men's and women's work . . . is doubtless due to historical reasons, and which leaves the higher paid work to men" (Webb, 1891, p. 647).

According to Barbara Drake, women had to face bitter hostility from employers who viewed attempts to organize as a threat to their "cheap and docile" female labor. Employers often requested women to sign away their right to unionize, a request that was frequently opposed (Drake, 1920, p. 32).

Although there was an increase in union participation by women in the late 1800's they not only had to bargain with employers, but also had to resist strong opposition by men's organizations. According to Fawcett:

> Those who desire to promote the efficiency and increase the wages of female labour have to contend against the constant and vigilant

opposition of Trades' Unions to the employment and the technical training of women in the better paid and more skilled branches of trade . . . (Fawcett, 1904, p. 296).

Beatrice Webb, writing in 1919, pointed out that craftsmen were unwilling to train women and thus allow them to learn a skilled craft and, except for cotton weavers and a few other textile occupations, "it was rare to find any women, however competent, admitted to any industrial occupation at which she could earn more than the lowest grade of unskilled male labourer" (Mrs. S. Webb, 1919, pp. 17-19). She added, however, that in the manual working occupations employers were always seeking to hire women.

Joan Robinson used the analysis discussed above to show that a wage differential between men and women will exist when men are organized, and hence able to enforce a minimum wage, and women are not organized. The effect is to make a labor supply curve for men (S_m) perfectly elastic (see Figure 1). Total employment (T) will be an amount that will equate the demand for labor to the male wage ($=M_t$). The marginal factor cost of female labor will be equated to the male wage ($=M_t$) to determine the level of employment of women (W), with men making up the difference between T and W. The wage of women remains at the female labor supply price (Robinson, 1961, pp. 303-304). She observed that women, generally, were less organized than men and this resulted from "a temperamental inability to organize as a group, . . . on a generally accepted view of both men and women that only men should earn union rates" (see Madden, 1972, p. 30).

II. HUMAN CAPITAL HYPOTHESES

An underlying assumption in much of the early work on male-female wage differences was that the sexes have different productive attributes that yield wage differentials. Although a few writers focused on physical differences, the most important and pervasive differences resulted from the process of socialization of

females leading to ambitions and attitudes which deemphasized labor market activity. This section begins with an examination of this notion of socialization.

Socialization

Socialization for inferiority in the labor market is an omnipresent force that results from psychological and social conditioning that produces in women permanent traits that are often thought to be natural or congenital and which are inimical to labor market activity.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writing in the late 1800's, noted that current teachings in political economy emphasized that the "economic man" is self serving; he "struggles for existence," with the "survival of the fittest." These crude traits were thought to be beyond women. The "economic woman" did not exist: "women were females and that's all; their working abilities were thought to be limited to personal services" (Gilman, 1911, pp. 234-237). The socially acceptable approach to life for men and women was expressed by Gilman: "what he wants he may strive for; what she wants must come through a gold ring; while young boys plan for what they will achieve and attain, young girls plan for whom they will achieve and attain" (Gilman, 1898, pp. 71 and 87).

Women's socialization for inferiority in the labor force was so complete that women as well as men generally accepted as appropriate the inferior position for females. Cadbury, et. al., writing about the position of women as compared to men workers, noted that "women are governed by the customs, standards, and traditions of the past, not only in economics, but in many other ways as well . . . Working women usually accept the dependent inferior position as right and just, because they have always been accustomed to it . . ." (Cadbury, Matheson, Shann, 1906, pp. 136-37). In a statement before the 1946 Royal Commission on Equal Pay,

Joan Robinson noted that it is the generally accepted view among women that it is right and natural for men to earn more than women (Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 1946, p. 107).

The prevalence of the attitude of female inferiority in the labor market would lead, of course, to limited opportunities for skill development and other investments in human capital. According to early writers, socialization manifests itself in several ways, including (1) low labor force commitment of females; (2) paucity of training opportunities, both formal and on the job; and (3) differential female supply prices.

Labor Force Commitment

Labor force commitment is a multi-faceted concept. High labor force commitment implies that the individual wishes to work at least a "regular" amount per year, to work "hard," to "get ahead" on the job, and to exhibit evidence of intentions of a long-term stay in the labor force. These desires are typically assumed to be present in the "economic man." They must normally be present in any person who expects to compete effectively in the job market. Persons who do not expect to spend a long period of time in the labor force would be hesitant to invest heavily in training, and they might also be more nonchalant about the quality and quantity of their work. Wright, in 1888, indicated that females frequently have these characteristics.

> She received low wages through an insufficient equipment for life-work, which is not the result of incapacity of mind or lack of skill, but is due largely to the hope that the permanence of work will be interrupted by matrimony. Inferior work is often the direct result of the same hope . . . . When occupying a good position she does not always fill it with the same assiduity that

> accompanies a man's service. She has not the responsibilities, either of family or of society, to lead her ambition to secure the best results . . . (Wright, 1893, p. 629).

At the turn of the century some unions set separate (lower) piecework scales for women. The standard was almost never met, however, owing to what Drake called "women's indifference." Since the ultimate future of the average woman is marriage, a future she recognizes, she "just jogs along, not endeavoring in any way to specialize or become fitted for a position" (Drake, 1920, p. 55). In 1919, Snedden noted that the shortness of stay in the labor force generates several counterproductive actions (or inactions) on the part of the women employees. Owing to a desire for marriage and homemaking, her attitude is that of a casual laborer taking a temporary job on which she does not care especially to be advanced (Snedden, 1919, pp. 537-560). Edgeworth suggested that employers rationally could be expected to hire males rather than females because of the well known expectation that the typical female would marry and drop out of the labor force at about the time she was beginning to make a contribution to the firm. This lack of commitment, he continued, precludes the hiring of women for better career positions (Edgeworth, 1922, p. 444).

There is ample evidence that, because of low labor force commitment, women have been willing to enter dead-end jobs which were avoided by men. In the printing shops in the late 1800's girls were replacing boys as "layers-on" because boys refused to do that work which led to "nothing in the future" (Cadbury, Matheson, Shann, 1906, p. 40).

Labor force commitment by mothers at the cost of neglecting the family was generally condemned by society. This social conditioning meant that women tended to put their family "first," that is, to work only at jobs which were

compatible with family responsibilities. The mother believed that it was better to have menial paid tasks in the home than to enter an occupation that would separate her from her children (Westminster Review, 1888-90), p. 273).

After noting that wage payments to females were generally less than to males, A. C. Pigou attributed this to the females tendency towards marriage and a shorter work life. "Women, looking forward, as they do, to matrimony and a life in the home, are not trained to industry as men are, and do not devote to it that period of their lives when they are strongest and most capable" (Pigou, 1950, p. 564). Therefore, he felt that there was nothing unfair about these wage differences, even if women's natural endowments were equal to those of men.

Investment in Human Capital

Hannah Crocker Mather, writing in 1818, made it clear that women are inherently the equal of men in terms of intellectual capacity. She noted that different types of education for men and women would cause different intellectual development: "Their powers and intellects are equal with the men, but their mode of education often checks their progress in learning . . . "(Mather, 1818, pp. 51-57). Mill concurred that any observed differences in intelligence and ability between the sexes could have come from differences in education and custom. He contended that man cannot pretend to know the natural differences between the sexes since civilization has seen women only in one situation--as servants to men. It was education in Mill's view that conditioned women not to compete with men. The "nature of women," according to Mill, is an "eminently artificial thing" -- the result of forced repression in some direction, unnatural stimulation in others" (Mill, 1898, p. 245).

When women began to enter the industrial labor force in the late 1800's they were unskilled and they faced practically insurmountable odds in their attempts to acquire skills. According to one author, "women have come into the field in the trying time between the decay of apprenticeship and the growth of technical training . . . They [women] are not skillful, and the unskilled-labor market is overcrowded" (International Review, 1882, p. 525). Mabel Robinson made a similar argument: "Industrial and domestic occupations are the mainstays of our working women, and between them give employment to eighty-six out of every hundred workers, but only a small proportion of these women have received the training through which a worker of merely average capability can do well in her calling" (Robinson, 1887, p. 56).

The Lady Commissioner's Report of 1894 contained substantial information on the lack of interest displayed by women with regard to skill acquisition and job promotions. With few exceptions, women were thought to be unwilling to serve long apprenticeships and to work the longer hours necessary to obtain on-the-job training; in fact, according to Bulley, "the lower wages of women are due in nine cases out of ten to their inferior skills" (Bulley, 1894, pp. 40-41).

Differential Female Supply Prices

Females as a group differ from males in that a larger proportion of the females receive financial support regardless of whether or not they are in the work force. An obvious consequence of subsidies to females is that their supply prices, hours worked, and labor force commitment differ. While it is true that not all females are subsidized, the consequence of having a mxiture of subsidized and unsubsidized females is a highly heterogeneous set of labor supply prices. Heterogeneity of supply price works against the organization of females for market power. This, of course, tends to permit wages to be pushed downward.

In 1887, Mabel Robinson hypothesized that "to a large class of working men's wives a few shillings weekly make all the difference between penury and comfort; these women, never realizing the misery their competition entails on those who are working for bare bread, will take work at a starvation wage" (Robinson, 1887, pp. 55-56). In this manner wages may actually be driven to a level below subsistence for the individual worker. However, since fewer males receive substantial support in the form of subsidies, their wages cannot for long be below the subsistence level.

Sidney Webb compared the subsidized female to the unskilled laborer who received assistance:

> It is impossible to overlook the effect of the fact that the woman has something else to sell besides her labour; and that many women are partially maintained out of other incomes than their own. I have been unable to satisfy myself to what extent these factors affect the standard wage of female manual workers. In so far as they do, the case becomes economically analogous to that of the unskilled labourer receiving a rate in aid of wages. Under the old poor law the labourer who, by exception, did not receive outdoor relief, found his wages reduced by the prevalance of the practice among his competitors (S. Webb, 1891, p. 660).

Edgeworth, in 1922, noted that females are different from males in terms of their effective supply price. Edgeworth indicated that "wives and daughters are apt to be subsidized; and though subsidies do not always lead to the offer of work on lowered terms, this result may be anticipated. . . The woman worker who has not acquired by custom and tradition the same unwillingness to work for less than will support a family" (Edgeworth, 1922, p. 436). The Edgeworth statement implies that with more willingness and determination on their part,

women could raise their "standard" wage. Florence stated the cause of the problem more explicitly than did Edgeworth. He described the chain of causality as follows: "Women do not in fact raise their wages to [the men's level] because they are inferior in bargaining power . . . They are inferior (in bargaining power) because they are insufficiently united and organized; and they are not sufficiently united and organized because their supply prices are so heterogenous" (Florence, Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 1945, p. 87).

According to Mill, supply and demand interaction could suppress the wages of single females to a much lower minimum than that of the minimum wages of males. The minimum for a single female becomes the "pittance absolutely requisite for sustenance of one human being." The lowest point to which competition could suppress male wages would be higher since the man must be able to support himself, a wife, and children in order to maintain the population. Even if the wife earns something, their joint wages must support themselves and their children. The lowest wage possible, therefore, necessarily occurs in the occupations of single females (Mill, 1898, p. 409).

Two points can be gleaned from the foregoing remarks: (1) women must show more market sophistication and self-esteem, and demand higher wages if they expect to obtain them; (2) the differential female supply price effectively precludes the development of strong labor bargaining units.

Physical Strength Differences

While physical strength is an important productive attribute even today, it was much more important in the 1800's and after the turn of the present century. There were many occupations in which women were unequipped physically to perform as well as men. In the Lady Commissioner's Report of 1894 it was stated that "where men and women are employed on the same work at a different wage, the

difference is generally to be accounted for by want of skill or muscular strength on the part of the women . . ." (Bulley, 1894, p. 141). Wright concurred that often it was the lack of physical endurance that rendered women generally less productive than men (Wright, 1893, p. 634). Mill noted that the subordination of women to men arose in earliest societies from female inferiority in muscle strength. This subordination continued and existed in the 1800's solely because of custom, physical superiority having been replaced by legal dominance (Mill, 1909, p. 19). J. R. Hicks, following Mill, maintained that women are paid less than men because in general they are less efficient owing to physical limitations and their preoccupation with household problems (J. R. Hicks, 1946, p. 99).

III. Summary and Conclusion

In Part I of this paper a benchmark was provided for certain hypotheses which were thought to explain male-female wage differentials around the turn of the century. In general, female inferiority in production was not an assumption in the theories. Although not independent, several reasons suggested for the lower wages received by women included: (1) Females voluntarily or involuntarily crowding into particular occupations thereby creating an excess supply of labor and driving down wages in these occupations. (2) Females were victims of segmented labor markets; jobs were "ladderless" for women, with barriers to upward mobility. (3) Male-dominated labor organizations controlled admittance to the best jobs. Although employers often sought female labor, their efforts were met by solid resistance from men's unions.

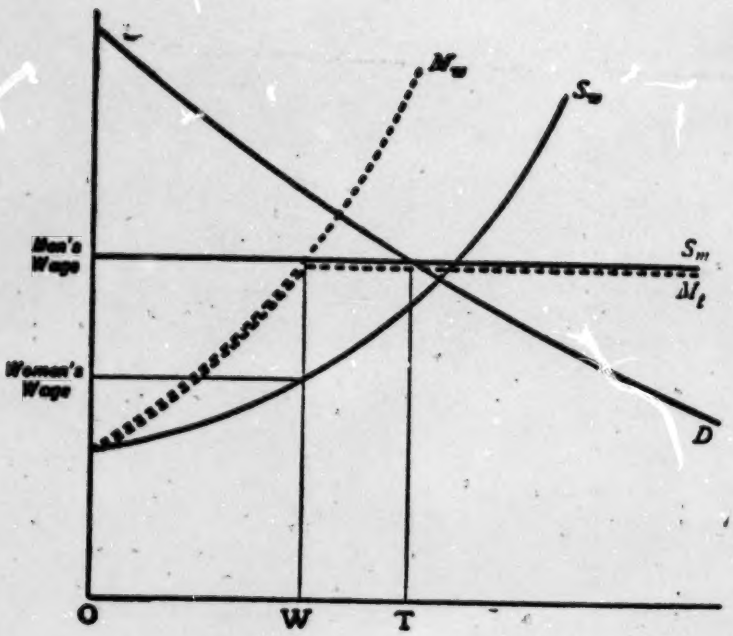
In Part II some basic causal forces were suggested which lead males and females to prepare differently for entrance into the labor market, and to act differently once they are in the labor force. It was suggested that, of all the

forces which act on females, the socialization process is the most detrimental with respect to labor market performance. The labor force commitment of females was examined and evidence showing weak commitment was found. Females had less interest than males in becoming more efficient in production. They apparently acquired fewer skills than men prior to entering the labor force as well as while on the job. It was argued also that women handle emergencies and secondary work tasks less efficiently than men. In addition, heterogeneity of female supply price was discussed as a phenomenon which hampered union organizational processes, leaving females without bargaining power.

An additional argument for male-female wage differentials that was set forth by earlier writers was that women were paid less owing to physical limitations.

When the discrimination theories of Part I are combined with the human capital theories of Part II, a reasonably clear picture emerges of why women have not fared as well as men in the labor market. The literature survey suggests that policy directed toward reducing male-female wage differentials should be broad in scope, addressing itself to the numerous causes of the differential indicated in Parts I and II. It should be recognized that relatively lower pay to women than to men does not necessarily imply sex discrimination (the essence of the discussion in Part I), nor does it necessarily imply female inferiority on the job (the essence of the discussion in Part II). It seems clear that the process of socialization of women from the cradle, which results in a deemphasis of labor market ambition and attitude, is the single most important cause of male-female wage differentials. One might speculate that this preference-shaping mechanism must be altered before equal pay for women can become a reality.

Figure 1



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